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ABSTRACT

The Partnership for Family Involvement in Education is a U.S. Department of Education initiative begun in 1994 to assist families with children's learning by developing national and local family-school-community collaborations. This paper discusses the rationale for the Partnership, including research on family, school, and community collaborations; the nature and status of the Partnership; and how research is linked to its ongoing activities. In discussing the rationale for the Partnership, the paper points to research showing that family involvement is a critical link to high-quality education, and then discusses obstacles to involvement, the school's role, the community's role, and new national laws. The paper then provides an overview of Partnership structure and activities, including Partnership promises, which are pledges of action developed by each steering committee based on a statement of common purpose; conferences; publications, including the "America Goes Back to School" activity kit, various booklets, "Preparing Your Child for College, which is a resource book for parents, and "Community Update," a monthly bulletin of the Department of Education that covers recent developments in its major programs. Also discussed is the Read*Write*Now! Program to combat the decline over the summer in students' reading skills. The paper concludes with an overview of ongoing research meant to provide baseline data and to track the Partnership's progress. The Partnership for Family Involvement in Education is an instructive example of relationships between public policy and educational research. (Contains 25 references.) (LPP)

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Reaching All Families: The Federal Initiative in Family-School Partnerships

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The U.S. Department of Education is engaged in a Partnership for Family Involvement in Education with more than 2400 family, education, community, business, and religious organizations, many of them at the national level. Begun in 1994, the Partnership aims to assist families with children's learning by developing national and local family-school-community collaborations.

A key aspect of the Partnership is to help schools involve all parents in their children's education. To this end, the Partnership has produced a booklet of accumulated knowledge and fresh ideas on school outreach strategies called Reaching All Families (Moles, 1996) and mailed it to every public school in the country. More on this will come later.

This presentation will discuss the rationale for the Partnership including research on family, school, and community collaborations; the nature and status of the Partnership; and how research is linked to its ongoing activities.

Rationale for the Partnership

An extensive white paper called Strong Families, Strong Schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1994), written in part by the author, lays out the rationale for the Partnership, drawing on recent educational research and promising practices regarding the roles of different partners. Fortunately, there is a strong research base, and the participating organizations provided new evaluative data on some of their programs. The white paper points out that 30 years of research show that family involvement is a critical link to high quality education.

There are many kinds of parent or family involvement in education both at home and at school. Joyce Epstein (1995) has developed a widely used typology describing six forms of involvement with emphasis on home-school relationships:

1. Parenting - helping families with parenting and childrearing skills and other home conditions to support learning
2. Communicating - two-way communication with families about school programs and student progress

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3. Volunteering - recruiting, training and organizing families as volunteers and audiences to support school programs and students
4. Learning at home - involving families with their children in learning activities at home including homework and other curriculum related activities and decisions
5. Decision making - including parents in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities
6. Collaborating with the community - integrating resources and services of community businesses, agencies, and other groups to strengthen school programs, family practices and student learning and development.

Epstein's work has been very influential across the country. For example, the National PTA (1997) has recently promulgated a set of six national standards for parent and family involvement programs which builds directly on Epstein's six types of parent involvement.

These types of involvement may have different kinds of effects on students, parents and teachers. For example, decision making can give parents a sense of ownership and teachers an awareness of parent perspectives while volunteering can give parents a better understanding of the teacher's job and dispose the teacher toward involving families in new ways (Epstein, 1995). An extensive survey found that parents generally feel they are not involved in education decision making and feel disconnected from their schools (USA Today, 1996).

Parenting and learning at home, two of Epstein's types, have a strong link to student achievement. Comprehensive programs do too (Henderson & Berla, 1994). The white paper notes that what the family does is more important to student success than parent income or education, perhaps twice as important by some estimates (Walberg, 1984). Critical factors include reading with children, limiting television viewing, monitoring out-of-school activities, setting high expectations, and offering support and encouragement for achievement.

There is much evidence to support these and other aspects of successful home learning environments such as reading together (Anderson et al., 1985), following daily routines including set bedtimes and time for homework (Clark, 1988), and adequate supervision coupled with warmth toward one's children (Baumrind, 1989).

<u>Some obstacles to involvement.</u> Many families face serious difficulties in helping their children. The white paper, <u>Strong Families, Strong Schools</u> (U.S. Department of Education, 1994) documents several such problems:

1. Limited time of employed and single parents. This also applies to many teachers. Children are often left unsupervised after school.

2. Uncertainty about what to do. Many young mothers and fathers are unprepared to be parents. Some parents have had bad experiences at school themselves and shy away from school contacts. Others are intimidated by schools and doubt the value of their contributions. Many say they would be willing to spend more time on home learning activities if guided by teachers, but teachers are seldom trained to work with families and some feel parents can contribute little.

3. Cultural barriers. Today's school families are very diverse, and many low-income immigrant parents do not understand English. Families also have differing views on their roles in relation to the schools and children's education. The life experiences and perspectives even of English speakers with little education may pose difficulties in communicating with school staffs.

4. Lack of community supports. More children than at any time since 1965 live in poverty, and their families have the least contact with the schools. Schools and community organizations need to reach out and help parents guide the growth of their children. Unsafe neighborhoods prevent many parents from coming to schools for after-hours meetings.

A lack of coordination between school counselors and teachers to pursue parent concerns and agreements, the large number of students for each secondary school teacher, and the short time each teacher instructs them are also school barriers to greater family involvement (Leitch & Tangri, 1988). Other family needs such as the health of its members or employment problems can also divert parents' energies and attention. Thus, we can see that barriers to family involvement exist within the home, school, and community, and in family-school mismatches such as language and cultural differences.

The U.S. Department of Education (Department) has just released a Report to Congress entitled Overcoming Barriers to Family Involvement in Title I Schools (Laguarda, Funkhouser & Stief, 1997). It describes barriers that affect both parents and school staffs, such as lack of time and other resources, and lack of information and training for collaboration. Other barriers exist in school organization and practices, in family-school differences, and in the lack of external supports for school-family partnerships. Findings from recent national surveys are used in the Report to show the extent of these barriers (see Research and the Partnership section). Successful local approaches to overcome the barriers are also described. An

ideabook based on these practices will be produced from the Report later this year.

Families also have some often-overlooked strengths that bear on their children's education. As their children's first and most important teachers, parents have vast opportunities to teach, serve as role models, and guide their children as they mature. Parents also have intimate knowledge of their children's needs, abilities, and interests. In addition, they have a keen interest in their children's education and future success. Finally, most parents want to work with the schools to improve their children's education (Moles, 1993). All these family strengths offer rich resources for building school-family partnership programs.

The school's role. Besides things parents can do at home and with the school, the larger part of Strong Families, Strong Schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1994) discusses how other institutions can support families directly and also provide services such as mentoring and after-school programs to help when parents cannot be there. These sections of the report are on:

- school-family partnership practices of schools
- community activities connecting families and schools
- family-friendly business practices
- state policies and activities connecting families and schools
- what federal programs are doing to support families

Schools can help families in a number of ways, as described in this white paper. To start, they can recognize the sense of disconnection experienced by many parents. Developing mutual trust and complementary responsibilities are keys to partnerships.

Some schools are moving to reduce distrust and cultural barriers that impede the development of true partnerships. They do this by such means as arranging contacts at convenient times for parents - sometimes in neutral settings, using home-school liaisons, providing translation services, and creating school resource centers that offer various services to families. Schools can train teachers to work with parents, expand school opportunities for family contacts, evaluate parents' needs, and give them a voice in school decisions. Schools are using homework hotlines and Internet services for parents, loaning personal computers, and combining voice mail with autodialing for two-way phone contacts between schools and families.

The well-known School Development Program created by James Comer is a comprehensive strategy to reduce alienation and build partnerships between the typical middle-class school staffs and low-income and minority families (Comer, 1988). It involves

parents as members of a school planning and management team, as organizers of activities to teach parents how to help their children with academics, and as participants in workshops, dinners, and other school events to bring parents and school staffs together.

The "Comer model" has been shown to improve student achievement and behavior in school and to involve parents at school and in the community. It is now operating in hundreds of school districts across the country (U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

Schools help parents to reinforce classroom instruction at home, to teach informally through naturally occurring home situations, and to strengthen various aspects of home learning environments. A number of school programs with these emphases show strong benefits, and it is important to note that many have focused on low-income and minority families (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Leler, 1983; U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

There are, however, some serious limitations of many of the above-mentioned programs. Aside from those with strong backing like the Comer model, many do not last very long. Most exist in only a few locations and are not easily replicated in other settings. The Partnership aims to facilitate the transfer of such promising practices.

In addition, some studies suffer from self selection of participating families. And, oftentimes, there are multiple programs in schools that make attribution of the effects of family-oriented programs difficult if not impossible. Long-term effects are also seldom studied. However, there are enough well-designed studies to affirm the benefits of parent involvement for students and their families, at least in the short term.

<u>The community's role.</u> This role is essential to help families raise their children. Many service organizations, agencies, religious institutions, and individual citizens are working to make their communities safer and drug-free. They are also working to reinforce parenting skills, to encourage people to serve as mentors, to link community services and school programs, and to extend learning opportunities.

The white paper describes programs and their evaluations in these and related areas. Studies show increases in parents' understanding of their educational role, in time spent with children on schoolwork, and in their children's academic performance from such efforts (Fruchter, Galletta & White, 1992; Rioux & Berla, 1993).

A number of studies have demonstrated increased student

achievement and motivation from tutoring assistance (Michael, 1990). If done well, mentoring programs can give youth who have few contacts with adults the emotional support and guidance to develop into responsible young adults. Big Brothers/Big Sisters has organized mentors for some years. A study of their program revealed the importance of careful screening and supervision to promote intensive interaction. The HOSTS (Help One Student to Succeed) program of mentoring and tutorial assistance in reading has proven successful, and now more than 400 sites use HOSTS (U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

It is often difficult to draw individual volunteers to work in low-income areas, but older citizens who live in these areas are a potential source. However, the resources of local organizations and additional funding are needed to augment the work of individual volunteers in supporting family-school partnerships. Added to that is the need for strong evaluations of these efforts so as to learn from them and better help others.

The white paper concludes that the task of connecting families and schools is formidable but also attainable. It will require "a shift in public attitudes regarding the importance of learning, a willingness of educators to fundamentally rethink the role of parents and school-family relationships, and the cooperation of the entire community" (U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

New national laws. Several recent laws provide further rationale and support for family-school partnerships. The Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994 sets new standards for student, family, and school performance. It also created a new National Education Goal on parent participation which reads: "Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children." Progress toward this goal will now be tracked by studies as is being done for the other goals (National Education Goals Panel, 1994). One objective under this goal calls on schools to help parents strengthen home learning activities and to involve them in school decision making.

Parents must also be involved in planning state and district school improvement programs which seek federal support under Goals 2000. This law also authorizes federally-funded parent information and resource centers in the states to serve parents of children from birth through high school and parent educators. At present, parent resource centers have been established in 28 states, and centers are planned for other states.

A second recent federal law is the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1994. This comprehensive statute reauthorizes the $7 billion Title I program of aid to low-income and low-

achieving students, and a number of other federal education programs including Even Start and bilingual education. These latter programs require family education, and parent outreach and training to facilitate the educational achievement of affected children.

Title I requires consultation with parents in developing and reviewing each affected school's parent involvement plans and an annual meeting to explain the program to parents. A new feature of Title I is that one percent of local program funds must be set aside for parent involvement activities in school districts that receive $5,000 or more. Required activities include helping parents to monitor their child's progress and to work with educators to improve the student's school performance. But significantly, teachers and other school staffs are also to be educated in the value of parent contributions and how to reach out to and work with them as equal partners. Roles for community-based organizations and businesses in parent involvement activities are also to be developed.

One other new Title 1 requirement is a school-parent compact that outlines how parents, the entire school staff, and students will share responsibility for higher student achievement. The form of the compact is to be determined by the school and parents. As schools develop compacts, research will be important to trace effects on the behavior of the signers. However, it seems likely that compacts will need to be coupled with follow-on activities to produce real change, and such activities deserve special attention. Thus, these new laws invite research and evaluation studies on a number of fronts to explore the implications and effects of their various parent-related provisions.

Overview of Partnership Activities

The Partnership for Family Involvement in Education is the broadest initiative of the Department in this area. It connects the U.S. Department of Education with more than 2400 national and local organizations including the 65-member National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, which has been in existence for more than fifteen years. The Partnership aims to promote children's learning through the development of family-school-community partnerships.

The Partnership began with the concerns of Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley, as expressed in his 1994 State of American Education address. In it, he argued that children and youth need more support and guidance from their families, friends, and the community, and that families and schools need to be reconnected to strengthen each other's efforts.

From this beginning Department of Education officials and senior

staff have met with many organizations in education, business, community service, religion, civil rights, and local government. A strategic plan was developed with many of these organizations (Family Involvement Partnership for Learning, 1995). Its five goals - to increase awareness, commitment, capacity building, knowledge development, and performance benchmarking - have evolved into the three current goals of the Partnership: strengthening partner activities, expanding membership, and conducting research and recognition activities to build Partnership capacity. This is obviously a long-term project, and it continues actively today.

Steering committees have been formed among stakeholders in four discrete sectors: families and schools, community groups, employers, and religious organizations. Higher education groups have also come together to work on key issues such as teacher preparation for family involvement in education. Each meets regularly to plan activities. The religious steering committee represents 75 percent of all religiously affiliated Americans. The Employers for Learning steering group includes business giants such as John Hancock, IBM, and United Airlines as well as small and local businesses.

The partners can improve their effectiveness by connecting with other groups and drawing on each other's strengths. They learn about and share the latest and best practices. Recognition is earned for the visible commitment of partner organizations. The members also receive Partnership publications and support on an on-going basis.

As examples of recent activities, the Community Organizations Steering Group is developing a guide for schools and communities on ways to extend learning by keeping school buildings open longer. The religious communities steering committee is meeting to further mentoring efforts in support of children's learning.

Partnership promises. Each sector steering committee has developed a statement of common purpose with a pledge of action for circulation to potential partners in their sector. For example, a "family-school partnership promise" has been created for signing by principals and representatives of a school's teachers, other staff and the parent organization. It pledges them to share responsibility at school and at home for better education, to promote more effective two-way communication between families and schools, to provide opportunities for families to learn how to help their children succeed in school, and it pledges school staff to work with families, to review progress regularly, and to help strengthen cooperative actions.

Schools pledge to do specific things such as reach out to parents as partners, offer them help, and be accessible when parents are

available. Families pledge to strengthen at-home activities such as encouraging reading, monitoring homework completion, and making sure children are prepared and attend school. Parents also pledge to become acquainted with school staffs and participate in the school decision-making process. To date, about 1200 schools have signed this pledge.

The community, business, and religious organizations steering groups have developed similar statements appropriate to their own relationship to the Partnership. In general these statements reflect the following approaches:

"Employers for Learning" urges businesses to identify a contact person for partnership activities and adopt family- and student-friendly practices such as providing leave time to attend parent conferences and volunteer in school, and providing parent training and child care.

"Community Organizations for Learning" supports learning communities through organized before- and after-school and summer activities, helping make streets safe for children, supporting supervised recreational activities, providing mentors and homework help programs, coordinating delivery of services, and supporting school improvement efforts locally.

"Religious Organizations for Learning" supports parent and family education programs, sponsoring opportunities for families to participate in the total education of their children, and working to understand better and to meet educational and family needs.

Statements of common purpose for each of the above sectors appear in various of the Partnership's publications (see America Goes Back to School below.)

Conferences. These members of the Partnership -- Teachers College, Columbia University, Working Mother magazine, and the U.S. Department of Education -- held an April 1996 conference in New York City on how the "time crunch" impacts on family involvement in education. More than 400 educators, employers, parents, researchers, religious leaders, and students discussed barriers and opportunities for greater family involvement raised by time pressures that affect family members. Based on a national competition, Golden Apple awards were given for family-friendly practices in three categories: families and schools, community groups, and employers. Scholastic Inc. also fielded a family involvement competition in the last year. Both recognition programs received media attention.

The Employers for Learning Steering Group, the Conference Board and the U.S. Department of Education are co-sponsoring a national business-education conference with the theme "Better Education is

Everybody's Business" on May 15-16, 1997. Case studies of promising programs developed by members of the steering group will be presented and recognition activities are planned. Products to help employers strengthen policies and programs that support employee involvement in education will be published. These include:

- results of a Conference Board members' survey on internal policies that support employee involvement
- a guide that includes cost-benefit analyses linking employee involvement to the "bottom line."

A national meeting and regional meetings on preparing schools for family involvement in education are currently being planned by the Family/School Steering Group for fall 1997. They will emphasize teacher preparation. Guides on best practices will be developed for various audiences both in colleges of education and in school systems.

Publications. The Partnership has produced a series of documents starting with Strong Families, Strong Schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1994) and a set of brochures condensing its several chapters. Other publications include:

America Goes Back to School: Get Involved! This partners' activity kit highlights promising approaches and local activities for parents and families, community groups, schools, and employers regarding seven key areas to improve education (U.S. Department of Education, 1996a). It was distributed to all public schools in the country before school opened in fall 1996 following a similar activity in fall 1995. It generated more than 500 community events and more than 50 mayoral proclamations in 1996.

Employers, Families and Education: Promoting Family Involvement in Learning. This booklet highlights ways businesses can become active partners and profiles the work of several companies and organizations (Galinsky, Goldsmith & Hardman, 1995).

Reaching All Families: Creating Family-Friendly Schools. This booklet describes outreach strategies for introducing school policies and programs, making personal contacts, sustaining communications, creating special programs, and working with specific groups of parents. It is based on fact sheets created by the Massachusetts Department of Education. The response from schools seems quite favorable, and many want additional copies for staff, although this like all Department publications have no copyright and may be reproduced freely (Moles, 1996).

Preparing Your Child for College. This resource book for parents gives general information like why attend college, ways to help

prepare for and choose a college, ideas on financing a college education, and other useful guidance (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

Community Update. This monthly bulletin from the Department covers recent developments in its major programs. Each bulletin has a section on current Partnership activities.

These and other Partnership publications can be obtained free of charge by phone (1-800-USA LEARN) or on the Department's Web site on the Internet (http://www.ed.gov; click on Secretary's Initiatives; click on Family Involvement.) This Web site also describes the activities of all the partners. It will eventually include descriptions of promising programs submitted by partner organizations, their relevant publications, and a calendar of upcoming events. More information on Partnership activities, including the following reading initiatives, is also available on the 800 number.

Reading initiatives. A significant program has evolved from the Partnership to combat the decline over the summer in reading skills for many students. Called Read*Write*Now! this literacy/mentoring effort links adult partners in weekly contacts with children who are encouraged to read and write 30 minutes a day and learn new vocabulary words (U.S. Department of Education, 1996c). The adult partners are enlisted through public libraries, Reading is Fundamental, Boys and Girls Clubs, and other organizations. Activity booklets are provided for pre-school and school-age children as well as a tutor's manual. Pizza Hut has donated pizza coupons as incentives. Read*Write*Now! has now run for two summers. In 1996 it is estimated to have reached 1 million children.

Read*Write*Now! has in turn led to the America Reads Challenge. This is the President's new initiative to help every child read well by the end of third grade. The plan is to enlist and train 1 million tutors to provide individualized and small group assistance after school, on weekends, and during the summer for K-4 students who are behind in reading. Reading specialists would train and supervise the tutors. Parents would also be assisted to help their children become successful readers. A number of colleges have pledged that work-study students will serve as tutors in the program, and a bill to fund the America Reads Challenge is being readied for Congressional action.

Current Research and the Partnership

Research is providing baseline data and tracking progress of the Partnership on several fronts; this will help make adjustments to improve the Partnership's work. First, a 1996 national survey of

K-8 principals has identified various kinds of school-based partnership-related activities, drawing in part on Epstein's six types and family-friendly approaches such as home visits and parent centers in schools. The survey asks principals about various ways of involving families (e.g. as volunteers, as school decision makers, as workshop learners), barriers to involvement (e.g. time of parents and staff, safety in the area), and ways of communicating with families (e.g. newsletters, positive phone calls, translations for non-English speakers).

This survey will stand as a national assessment of the status of school-sponsored partnership activities near the beginning of the Partnership for Family Involvement in Education. For example, in 1996 78 percent of schools reported that more than half of their parents attended parent-teacher conferences during the school year, and 41 percent reported that parent input is considered when making policy decisions in three or more areas (National Education Goals Panel, 1996). A detailed report of findings will be issued soon.

Second, a 1996 national household telephone survey of parents asked about their involvement with children's education at home, in the community, and in schools. It found that 62 percent of students in grades 3-12 had parents who reported that they participated in two or more activities in their child's school during the current school year (National Education Goals Panel, 1996). Both studies have been conducted by the Department's National Center for Education Statistics. Their findings will help track progress toward the National Education Goal on parental participation, as noted in the findings cited, and the status of activities related to the Partnership.

Third, a 1996 study of state education agencies and their activities to support school and district family involvement programs and practices has been conducted by the Council of Chief State School Officers. States can legislate supports such as providing parents and educators with information and skills. They can also commit resources, provide technical assistance, and assist schools and districts to implement laws such as the Title I parent involvement provisions. All this can provide significant support to local partnership activities. A report on the findings of this study will be issued soon.

Findings from these three surveys have been used in the Department's recent report to Congress on overcoming barriers to family involvement in Title I schools (Laguarda, Funkhouser & Stief, 1997).

Finally, a survey is being conducted of families with older school-age children. It examines ways that schools are working with parents on preparing students for college, academic standards, and the use of technology to link families and

schools. Findings are expected in June, 1997.

In addition, the Department's web site will soon carry evaluation tools that partner organizations can use to measure the success of their own family involvement programs.

Conclusion

The Partnership for Family Involvement in Education is an instructive example of relationships between public policy and educational research. It began with Secretary Riley's experience as governor of South Carolina in building support among diverse constituencies for education reforms and the parallel track of extensive research on parent involvement in education in recent decades. Unlike most education reform efforts, then Governor Riley involved tens of thousands of people in developing the reforms and worked aggressively at building parent and public support for educational change. As a result, partnership activities with schools increased manyfold, and student achievement and attendance also increased.

The white paper review of research provides a strong rationale for the U.S. Department of Education's initiative to build a national partnership and the conviction that a new federal program is not enough -- that many independent institutions, organizations, and individuals must work together. Moreover, it points to many programs and practices which hold promise for improving family-school connections.

Would the Partnership have proceeded without a strong research base? Perhaps so, given the urgency of the situation and the experience of Secretary Riley. But the research base in the white paper adds legitimacy to the effort, and more important it points to some actions that can make a bigger difference than others. It helps focus on alterable practices rather than more intractable conditions that may be of lesser importance.

Research continues to inform the Partnership as the activities cited illustrate. Over the course of time research will show how practices are changing, and how well school and community partners are reaching all families.

Thus the Partnership is a vital contemporary example of the ways in which research and policy can inform and support each other. Ongoing research on the ways schools, communities, and families can work together is an important base for local initiatives and the national Partnership for Family Involvement in Education.

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